ASGER JORN´S AARHUS MURAL

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Edited by Guy Atkins

With an introduction by Erik Nyholm

Photographs by Dominique Darbois

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Editor's Note

This description of Asger Jorn's ceramic wall at Aarhus is published on the occasion of the artist's fiftieth birthday on 3 March, 1964. The publication has been sponsored by a small group of his friends in England, France, Germany and Italy, in the hope that the photographs and texts will make the Aarhus relief better known outside Denmark.

As the bibliography shows, there have been a number of illustrated articles in Danish periodicals, but these have had a very limited circulation outside their own country. One reason for this lack of a wider public is that it is impossible to photograph the mural in such a way as to do it justice. The overall length, including two intervening double doors, is 101 feet (30.78 metres), and the view on the left is partly obstructed by a large conservatory. Dominique Darbois is the first photographer who has managed to overcome the inherent difficulties of the environment.

The three panels of the mural have been reproduced on separate pages of the brochure instead of in a single sequence because this enables the reader to study the work in greater detail and it makes the pages easier to handle. The alternative was either to reduce the scale of the photographs or to make an unwieldy number of folds in the paper. It therefore seemed better to sacrifice the overall view, especially since the work itself is divided into three separate areas and the whole wall is far too large for the spectator to take in at a single glance.

The Danish artist Erik Nyholm, who has written the introduction, began in the early 'fifties to experiment with ceramics. Asger Jorn and Erik Nyholm worked together in Silkeborg before Jorn made his first large ceramics at Sorring, near Silkeborg, in the late summer of 1953. Some typical works of this period are to be found in the Silkeborg Museum.

The note on Relief I – II, opus 27, has been included because the music was inspired by the Aarhus relief. The composer Ib Nørholm has – to quote the programme note – created 'a related world of sound'.

THE LEFT PANEL
Measurements: 3 m. 10·5 cm. × 8 m. 40 cm.
(10 ft. 2 in. × 27 ft. 10½ in.)
There is a double door to the right of this panel

History of the Mural

Those who visit the new senior school (statsgymnasium) at Aarhus in Denmark, where Asger Jorn's ceramic relief fills one side of the large hall, will probably notice a certain incongruity between the mural and its rather severe architectural setting. To explain this contrast it is necessary to give a short account of how the mural came to be commissioned. Ideally the artist and the architects should have worked hand in hand on such a project from the beginning. Unfortunately such close collaboration was impossible in this case, because the school building was already completed by the time the Danish Arts Foundation gave its approval for the ceramic to be made.

The idea of including a large ceramic mural in the building plans was first discussed as early as 1954. Asger Jorn met the architects Arne Gravers and Johan Richter in January 1955. It soon became clear that the two sides had fundamentally different views on the principles of combining architecture and 'decoration'. In the end they decided to work together in spite of their differences, probably hoping that the absence of compromise might have its own advantages. In any case it was by no means sure that the funds and permission for the mural would be forthcoming at all.

The issue was still uncertain when building was begun in 1956. It was not until December 1957 that the Arts Foundation invited Jorn to submit a sketch for the ceramic relief. He complied within a few weeks by sending drawings for several alternative projects. Months went by without a decision being reached. The school building was due to be completed by August 1958. As the completion date approached Jorn became impatient and was ready to abandon the whole idea. In November 1958 the Arts Foundation reached its decision and commissioned Jorn to construct a ceramic relief of approximately 3 × 30 metres for the main hall of the school.

It is characteristic of Jorn that in a working period of four months he completed the project which others had been debating for four years.

Jorn chose Albisola as the best possible place for carrying out the work. This little town on the Italian Riviera is a well known centre for ceramics. The traditions of its workshops go back to the Saracens. Jorn first went to Albisola in 1954 and he soon became the pivot and inspiration for experiments in ceramics with a group of

international artists such as Matta, Lucio Fontana, Enrico Baj, Karel Appel, Corneille, Scanavino, Dangelo. In the autumn of 1954 these artists, together with Jorn, held an exhibition entitled *Ceramiche: Incontro internazionale di Albisola* in connection with the Tenth Triennale at Milan.

From 1954 – 1959 Jorn spent several months every year at Albisola. There were various reasons why, when it came to making the large relief, it seemed natural to go to Albisola. The Italians' fine craftsmanship, their interest in experimental work and their inherent respect for Asger Jorn as an artist – these things would provide the necessary stimulus and support for the arduous task that lay ahead. Jorn soon reached an agreement with the San Giorgio factory, so that after various formalities had been completed, he was able to start work during the early summer of 1959. The entire resources of the factory were put at his disposal.

The relief had to be made in three sections of unequal length to allow for two doors in the wall at the school. The exact measurements of the areas are given in the captions to the photographs. The overall dimensions of the ceramic panels, excluding doors, are *c.* 3 metres (10 feet) in height by *c.* 27 metres (89 feet) in length.

The sketch which Jorn had made for the Arts Foundation was in the proportion of 1 : 20. Now he began by firing a working model of 1 : 10. This ceramic sketch, which the artist has in his house at Albisola, gives the impression of being a vision of things to come rather than an actual working model. The same is true of the earlier sketch. Yet the rhythm and colour scheme and many of the central figures are maintained throughout the three stages. In the end it was of course the physical encounter and battle with the material which produced such astounding results.

In his earlier and smaller reliefs Jorn had already shown that it is possible to improvise to a much greater extent than people had previously thought possible, but the work which he now had to undertake was on such a vast scale that one began to have doubts. Perhaps the tedious discussions of the last four years and the continual uncertainty might have undermined his enthusiasm. But such fears were quite unfounded. When Jorn finally went to work it was like an explosion.

At 4 o'clock one morning in June the first tons of clay were rolled from the factory on to a wooden floor in the open where Jorn was to work. He began before sunrise. The clay was heaped up, flattened, stamped firm and cut up. Images began to rise over an area of more than eight cubic metres of clay, amounting to about one

THE CENTRE PANEL
Measurements: 3 m. 10·5 cm. × 16 m. 60 cm.
(10 ft. 2 in. × 54 ft. 5½ in.)

There are double doors on the left and right of this panel

tenth of the whole relief. Some images were erased, others emerged, until every centimetre had been worked over. The clay masses were brutally or tenderly pressed, scraped, cut and kneaded from a thickness of 15 cm. to over 60 cm. where the figures burst forth. Coloured pieces of glass were pressed into small secret pockets, scooter tracks ran over the flat surfaces, and so the work progressed while the day was still young. Bowls of slip were brought out, and with brooms and brushes the fresh clay was painted, splashed and sprayed with the light and dark engobes to emphasize the shapes. This first painting, which was largely obliterated later on, was a kind of overture to the final glaze painting. It served to bring out the rough pictorial effect of the relief. In the finished work there are many places where the raw clay colours have been allowed to remain, dry and flat, as a powerful contrast to the shining glazes. The idea of using glazed and unglazed slips together with coloured glazes is typical of Jorn's untraditional way of working.

The sun began to stiffen the masses of clay. After it had been painted the whole block was marked out to be cut into smaller sections. Billowing, broken, horizontal and vertical lines began to furrow the picture surface with a rhythm so confident that it was a work of art in itself. By now it was only ten in the morning and the first part of the relief was done. It was ready to be hollowed slightly underneath, then lettered, numbered and pushed onto the drying racks. Every day Jorn and his helpers worked from five in the morning until shortly before mid-day. The relief was made in eleven sections. It took eleven days to mould more than twelve tons of clay and make about twelve hundred single pieces ready for their first turn in the kiln. It was an almost superhuman task, but this was how it had to be done.

It was typical of Jorn that he did not begin at one end and work through to the other. He treated the relief as if it were a huge picture and he fought across the whole ground simultaneously. On the large middle panel he worked alternately on the left and right sections. In order to ensure the continuity of cutting and pictorial line it was enough for him to have a single row of vertical pieces from the last adjoining section to look at. The whole relief lived in his mind as a unified vision. The work progressed in a series of bursts. His intuitive knowledge, coupled with an iron discipline, gave him the freedom to improvise.

In former days Albisola had a fine clay. It is said that the Albisolan potters who founded the famous ceramic centre of Vallauris in the Alpes Maritimes would travel back to Albisola to fetch their clay. Now the town has

expanded over the clay pits, so that the clay has to be imported and mixed locally according to need. For Jorn's ceramic four different kinds of clay were used and mixed with grog. This produced a clay similar to that used in stoneware, but with a low vitrification point and a stone-gray raw surface.

The June heat and the Mediterranean breezes soon dried the clay blocks and the kilns could be fired. In Albisola they still use the old woodfired Ligurian double-chambered oven with rising flames. The lower chamber is a muffled oven for glost firing at 950 °C. The biscuit firing is done above with an open fire at about 900 °C.

Kiln after kiln was filled and emptied until the whole relief had been fired once. Gradually the many pieces were re-assembled and glazing could begin again. Each of the three main panels was assembled separately and glazed by itself. The whole register of ceramic glazes was brought into play: bright and matt, transparent and opaque, running and crazed glazes; and their as yet hidden colours ranged from gray and clayey hues across to blood red, topaz, emerald green and pure quartz crystal. They were all factory glazes from many different countries, but Jorn used them in a supreme and unprecedented manner.

Before long the kilns were smoking as the glaze firing got into its stride. Pieces were carried in and out, laid together, painted and fired again. Many went through the burning fiery furnace three or four times. The orange colours got a special firing at 600 °C.

These were hectic and confusing days. Pieces of the relief were lost, switched or discovered in the wrong places. Between the finished sections there lay others with a shroud of unburnt glaze over them, for neither slips nor glazes reveal their true colours before being fired. It required strength and concentration to maintain – among the anonymous white-gray glaze clouds – the colour and rhythm of the ultimate work. Jorn did not falter at any point. He exploited all the materials with a self-assurance that sprang from a complete understanding of their potentialities. As the summer drew to a close the relief began to tighten and take its final shape.

Towards the middle of September it was finished and lay shimmering on the ground behind 'Ceramiche San Giorgio'. Tourists and people from the town directed their evening stroll towards the factory to stand and admire: *Il più grande pannello in ceramica nel mondo.*

After loading the eight tons of fragments onto the train for Aarhus, Jorn put in dozens of cases of spaghetti

THE RIGHT PANEL

Measurements: 3 m. 10·5 cm. × 2 m. 18·5 cm.
(10 ft. 2 in. × 7 ft. 2 in.)

There is a double door to the left of this panel

and macaroni and pounds of best Parmisan cheese for the Italian team that would help to mount the mural in Denmark. They were maestro Salino and ceramicist Pastorino from the Albisola factory, and the expert mason Sportorno. Jorn was not risking Danish gravy on these men.

The relief reached Aarhus at the beginning of October. The twelve hundred pieces were laid out in their right order in front of the long bare wall of the school. The last phase was ready to begin. Now the work had to be freshly created and its rhythm had to be recaptured for the final effort.

Danish masons helped the Italians. Iron supports were embedded in the wall. Calcium, sand and cement were mixed in a mortar. The ceramic was mounted from the floor upwards. The joints between the fragments were filled in and deliberately indented to form a living accompaniment to the drama that slowly took shape along the wall.

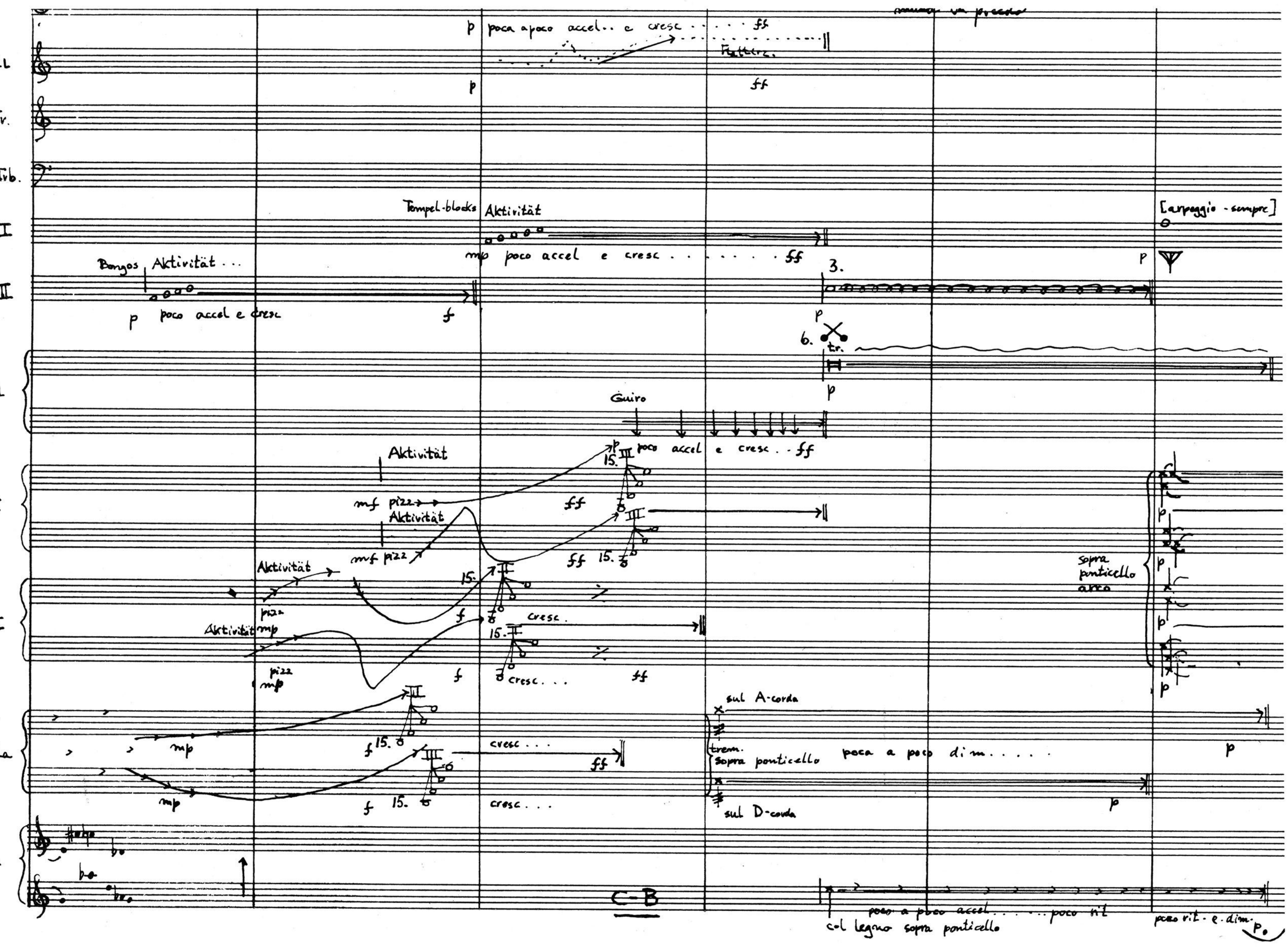
By the end of October all three sections were finished. The smallest to the right of the entrance bears the inscription SAN GIORGIO ALBISOLA – JORN 59.

The Arts Foundation presented the relief to the school at a ceremony held on 5 November, 1959. Friend and foe met to see and discuss the great work. The discussion will probably continue, because Jorn has created a masterpiece of modern art. That kind of thing is not done in Denmark.

Now it hangs in the autumn darkness of the north. Only a summer's work, yet a life's work. It was created in the south, but inspired by the north. A myth of Jutland!

Once more one walks along it and lets one's hand follow the moving surface, the rough and the polished. It breathes a great humanity. It speaks for itself.

ERIK NYHOLM



A page from the score of Relief II by Ib Nørholm

Relief I-II, opus 27

The composition entitled Relief I–II, opus 27, is the work of the thirty-three year old Danish composer Ib Nørholm. Relief I (haut) and Relief II (bas) were inspired by Asger Jorn's ceramic wall at Aarhus. The work was first performed by the municipal chamber orchestra in Dortmund, Germany, on 20 May, 1963, conducted by Lavard Friisholm from Copenhagen. The performance was recorded and relayed on the Danish radio in the series 'Music of our time' at 10.15 pm on 12 June, 1963.

Part I was written in four months and takes about seven minutes to perform, whereas Part II was composed in one evening and is played in about six minutes.

The orchestra consists of twenty-three players in three sections: wind (4); string (15); percussion including piano (4). The instruments are as follows: flute, clarinet, trumpet, trombone; first violins (4), second violins (4), violas (4), cellos (2), double bass; marimba, gongs (large and small), temple blocks (5), maracas, suspended cymbals (2), antique cymbals (7), vibraphone, big drum, African drums (2), bongos (4), snare drum, cow bells (5), piano, South American gourd, triangles (2). Auxiliary instruments include a wire brush, comb, frog clickers· two sharp pencils for gliding along the strings of the piano, a clothes peg, a large screw.

Relief I is tightly scored, whereas Relief II provides for impromptu performance. The word *Aktivität* in the score indicates that the player is required to improvise. As the programme note says: *So entsteht aus einer Notationsabstufung – von der traditionellen metrischen durch eine optische bis zu einer ganz freien grafischen Notation (Improvisationskurven und Spielanweisungen) – ein proportional mit dieser abschwächender Verlauf, vom eindeutig Definierten, Konturierten bis zum vieldeutig Undefinierbaren, Konturlosen. Ohne schematisch durchgeführt zu werden, zeichnet sich diese Entwicklung im Verlauf der Sätz ab.*

The visual impact of the page of the score that is shown in the photograph has a chance affinity with the rhythmical character of the mural to which Erik Nyholm refers in his preface.

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